

China's Southern Great Wall in Northern Myanmar Ignites Local Anguish

Mine Smine & Laure Siegel
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Photo: Courtesy of local residents

About the authors: Mine Smine is the pseudonym of a journalist and photographer based in Northern Shan State and specialized in ethnic communities' issues. Laure Siegel is Southeast Asia correspondent for French-investigative outlet Mediapart based in Bangkok and a media trainer. In the wake of the February 1st military coup d'Etat in Nay Pyi Daw, they co-founded The Myanmar Project Collective, a network of reporters who document the post-coup events across the country from the ground. Together they researched and wrote this feature on how China uses the Covid-19 pandemic and the post-coup lawless situation to build a permanent fence along its border with Myanmar and how the disruption of cross-border trade impacts the local economy.

About Researchers' Republic: We are a team of about a dozen researchers from across Myanmar, led by our director, May Zin Thaw, who founded the organization in 2016. Many of us have worked together for a number of years. Most of us are still based inside Myanmar, and some of us have left the country since the military coup of February 1st, 2021. Our aim is to document the situation in Myanmar, and put it in perspective, looking into the past, not just the present, and with the future in mind. We believe that almost every aspect of life has been made so much worse by the coup and the criminal and exploitative nature of the military regime. But we also believe that it is important to see that the situation was already difficult, for the people and for the environment, long before the coup. So that the democracy movement and the people of Myanmar can identify solutions today, and when democracy returns to Myanmar. That day could not come soon enough! Our work has a strong focus on northern Myanmar and the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor. It focuses particularly on issues of climate change, the environment, land rights, labor rights, business and human rights, natural resources management, drugs, health, education, conflict, displacement, and gender.

About the Project: This paper is the third in a series produced by [Researchers' Republic](#) in collaboration with [The Myanmar Project Collective](#). Their curated work can be followed and supported on [Visual Rebellion Myanmar](#), a platform for Burmese photographers, filmmakers and artists. This series of papers was funded by the [United States Institute of Peace](#).

In the middle of political turmoil, China is resuming the building of a permanent wall at its frontier with Myanmar. Officially, the aim is to contain the spread of Covid-19 to its southern provinces from Southeast Asia, but it seems to be part of a broader national security concern. The border closure and the militarization of the formerly lax border areas in Kachin and Northern Shan State have a massive impact on the local communities who were reliant on cross-border trade for their everyday survival.

Photo: The Myanmar Photo Project Collective



Taking down the wall with bare hands

"Prior to the Covid-19 outbreak in Myanmar, locals living along the Myanmar-China border from both sides were able to cross the border freely," says Nan San Kham, a resident of Hat Hin village, Namkham Township on the Myanmar-China border, to our journalist. Lots of people were crossing informally, and some were sent back from time to time if they did not go through the designated gates with the necessary border resident cards. "Since June 2020, the Chinese government has started to build fences on Burmese land, with no consultation, and it is now almost impossible to cross." Nan San Kham is a Shan woman who owns land in the area and one of a hundred locals who was involved in the demolition of a Chinese fence which she said was built near her village.

On September 12, 2021, the fence dispute took a contentious turn in Hat Hin Village, Namkham Township. On this day, local residents saw Chinese workers crossing the border to work on the construction of the fence in the area and went on to tell their village elders about it.

Officials from Hat Hin village had been informed earlier regarding the construction of a wall from the Chinese side. The informants were not from the Chinese government but were village headmen in China living across their place. Hat Hin village representatives replied that if a fence was erected, it should not reach local-owned land.

Later, when Chinese people were seen planting fence posts on the Burmese side, locals warned village officials and mobilized to destroy them. "It takes only 15 minutes to travel from Hat Hin village to the Chinese fence site. But by the time we got to the fence, there were no Chinese workers anymore. There were so many of us that they must have been scared and ran away," says Nan San Kham.

Locals pulled out poles erected by Chinese nationals and threw them on their side. No one from the Burmese government was involved in the destruction, and there was no Chinese intervention during the vandalism.

On the same day, residents of Mahnlyoe town, Muse Township, dismantled a border fence built by China on Myanmar territory. In Naung Kham village, Namkham Township, a fence was erected again on October 18, after it was destroyed a first time on July 14th by residents. "They came to build on our farm. It became difficult to cultivate. It is not easy to travel. If they continue to do so, it will be very difficult for us to make ends meet," a resident said to Shan News. The residents of Naung Kham destroyed the fence built by China near border post 58 because they say it intruded four meters into Myanmar territory from the borderline.



On October 30, they received a threatening letter from the Chinese village across from Naung Kham, which was posted on WeChat social media accounts and spread online. "The letter is not from the Chinese government. It is from the head of the Chinese village and was written in Shan, and it warned that if we cultivate our land inside where the fence was built they will destroy our crops," said Naung Kham resident, Ko Aik Aung Myat, to the DVB. Villagers said they destroyed the fence because it encroached on farmland owned by their ancestors.

A similar event happened on October 25, 2021, in Pan Kham village, Muse Township, where 250 local people demolished a 50-foot border fence that had been erected the day before by Chinese workers.

Before forcing into northern Shan State, China started trespassing in Kachin State. On June 23, 2021, the Chinese invaded and occupied the Burmese-Chinese border post (53/1-53/2) in the Man Wain Cyi area of Mansi Township, Kachin State, and erected a fence around Kanpaithi Township at the end of July. The locals sent a letter of protest straight away, but as of October 21, 2021, they did not receive a response, according to Kachin-based 74 Media.

Since July 2021, fences were also erected across the Myanmar-China border in Man Mai Village, Pansai Township, Mong Ko, Muse Township and Manthero township. A Muse resident quoted by [Shan News](#) said that they made signs to mark Myanmar territory on the border, but to no avail: "They build fences on their soil first, then they build fishponds and place their flag outside their fence. If there is no objection, they build a second fence around the fishponds and plant flag posts. They steal our land as much as they can get away with."

Protecting the wall with barbed wires, guards, dogs and landmines



Photo: Courtesy of local residents

According to [Radio Free Asia](#), as of September 2021, China had built a barbed-wire fence spanning around 1,000 km between Ruili, Lijiang, and the Gaoligong mountains in Yunnan. In October 2021, Chinese authorities released a bilingual Burmese-Chinese audio file, which was played on a loudspeaker along the fence. The audio file reads, "Do not approach the border."

"The fence is well-built so that it cannot be crossed. It is surrounded by barbed wire over 10 feet high. Watchtower CCTV cameras are also installed. At night, the fences are lit well, so it feels like daylight, and the guards are watching day and night. The guards are armed with guns. The number of the guards is estimated to be about ten," say Hat Hin residents interviewed by our journalist.

A [Chinese media specialized in military affairs reported](#) that officers from remote Yunnan police stations "recently joined forces with cadres of the border township and village committees, border guards and militiamen to conduct joint patrols on the China-Myanmar border line to crack down on cross-border illegal and criminal activities and strictly prevent the importation of the epidemic."

In July 2021, the [South China Morning Post](#) quoted a leader of a patrol group from the Chinese side, as the local government in Ruili, Yunnan, started to mobilize vigilante groups along the frontier. They also recruited thousands of former traders, ruined by the closure of the border, and backed them up with dogs and drones.

"It's equipped with motion and sound sensors and an artificial intelligence system to filter out the movements caused by wind, fallen trees or wild animals. Once the sensors are triggered, the high-definition cameras with infrared capability will automatically turn to the source to allow the control centers to further check. If illegal activity is found, the vigilante patrol team, or local police or armed police team will be notified to start a search," said Ding, who is now patrolling areas near the Jiegao bridge, a major crossing between China and Myanmar.

Landmines were also part of the deterrent strategy until recently. On September 1, 2021, Chinese authorities began removing landmines along the border between southwestern Yunnan province and Myanmar on the Chinese side. RFA quotes a Chinese resident living in the area: "It is an immoral act to use landmines against your own citizens on your own soil, in peacetime. This is probably because of the very large numbers of people moving back and forth informally across the border between Myanmar and China. It was hard for them to control that border."



From September 2020, China started erecting barbed-wire fences along the border around Laiza and Parjaung in Kachin and in Laukkai, Muse and Hopang districts, and the Wa Self-Administered Region in Shan State, which were believed by the NLD government to be temporary.

"The dispute over the border between northern Shan State and China has simmered on and off since 2018. China's frequent erection of fences and flagpoles along Shan State's northern border without notifying the Myanmar side is a longstanding source of tension. In January 2019, the Chinese Border Guard destroyed a Myanmar flagpole between BP-144/3 and BP-144/4 in Chinshwehaw Township in the Kokang SAZ," reminds the Irrawaddy.

Challenging a six-decades long border agreement

Locals say that the Chinese government has been invading the border since U Thein Sein's government and monitoring it closely since the NLD took office by heightening sanctions against those who were arrested crossing the border illegally. "The Burmese-Chinese border issue became well-known among the people when the government led by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi pushed authorities to intervene. However, the NLD government did not make much progress as expected," said a CSO representative in northern Shan State to our journalist. He added that locals living along the border at the time did not pay much attention to it because, at that time, China did not impose such restrictions. "The relation between China and the locals is interdependent since the locals have to rely on Chinese goods and many of them were doing economically well by exporting their products to China."

In 2019, the two sides agreed to review the official boundary for the first time since 1995, but the promise was lost in the chaos provoked by the double blow of Covid-19 and a military coup. From April 2020, the Chinese government closed all gates at the China-Burmese border following the outbreak in China. After Covid-19 cases emerged in border areas, residents living along the border said the number of guards has increased, and access has been further tightened. Limiting illegal travel across the Yunnan border became one of its obvious priorities as the pandemic started creeping into Myanmar.

Three weeks before the coup d'Etat, NLD government spokesman, U Zaw Htay, said that he opposed the construction of a permanent wall between the 2200 km long China-Myanmar shared border. They asserted that the Southeast Asian country will only accept a temporary barbed wire wall justified by Covid-19, such as the one which was erected by Thailand on its border with Myanmar at the beginning of 2020.

China has disputed the claim that the fence was crossing Burmese land, but it was nonetheless constructed by a Chinese company without an agreement process with the Myanmar side. When asked about the issue by [The Irrawaddy](#) at a press conference, U Zaw Htay said: "There is a border agreement. No side can build permanently within 10 meters of the border on either side. China will have to remove any new, permanent fences which encroach on the buffer zone between the two countries."

The boundary agreement was first negotiated between the British and the Qing governments in the 1890s, then again in the 1930s. Then Burmese prime minister, U Nu, and his Chinese counterpart, Zhou Enlai, signed an agreement in October 1960, introducing the 10-meter rule along the border. Border posts were erected the following year. In 1997, Myanmar and China signed a new

border management and cooperation agreement to solve disputes and allow cross-border religious activities. In September 2021, the coup-making junta led by general Min Aung Hlaing renewed negotiation with China and agreed to enhance enforcement and monitoring of the border, according to Chinese [media](#).

Normally, Chinese and Myanmar citizens along the border could cross at the national-level Muse-Ruili crossing point or through several other provincial and county-level crossing points. Ethnic kin and relatives from villages on both sides are granted special access, though travel permissions fluctuate. Our journalist explains that there are two options: "Local people living along the border can apply for a red book which costs 10 000 MMK a year and is valid for one year. If you go to China, you still have to get a ticket and pay 200 MMK each time you pass, and it is valid for a week. There is also the option of a one-off "Credit Card," which costs 1000 to 2000 MMK and is also valid for one week."

During the military coup and Covid-19, the Chinese side tightened its grip and began suspending border trade and movement of people at all 11 Myanmar-China entry and exit gates in Kachin and Shan states. A source told [The Irrawaddy](#) that "anyone trying to cross the border illegally faces prison terms and rewards of 1,000 yuan (280,000 MMK) were being offered to anyone apprehending Myanmar citizens trying to cross the border illegally."

The general chaos provoked by Covid-19 and the coup has given China the perfect opportunity to swiftly neglect all those agreements and begin building a permanent, concrete wall combined with modern surveillance technology.

Keeping Covid-19 out and keeping Chinese nationals in

Observers of China affairs put forward several reasons for building a "fortress of iron," as stated by Zong Guoying, Yunnan's vice-governor, who stressed the need to stamp out cross-border transmissions. The official narrative consists of containing the spread of the many Covid-19 virus variants by undocumented migrant workers from countries with less stringent lockdown measures and fewer means to control it.

Experts on China-Myanmar affairs believe the China Communist Party's (CCP) motivations to fence up the border are instead more varied and related to long-standing issues:

- Stopping the cross-border flow of illegal activities such as weapons, rare wildlife, drugs and their precursors chemicals trafficking as well as prostitution and gambling operations in lawless border towns controlled by local mafias or armed groups such as the Kokang SAZ. Jade and gemstones, timber, tin and copper ore are also carried in massive volumes on "small roads" and illicit river crossings to avoid taxation and customs duties.

"Chinese policies are clearly targeted at stopping any Chinese nationals from crossing the border and staying in Northern Myanmar. Local governments across China were responsible for calling all of their nationals back before July 2021. And interestingly -- the illicit activity in Kokang has continued, even scaling up over the last year, with the construction of new casinos," says Jason Tower, United States Institute of Peace (USIP).

- Monitoring the increasingly volatile situation as fighting resumed between the Burmese army and northern ethnic armed organizations in the wake of the coup d'Etat. Refugee crises like the Kokang conflicts of 2009 and 2015 caused the rapid displacement of tens of thousands of people from Myanmar.
- Clamping down on the activities of Christian groups and communities on both sides of the Myanmar-Chinese border, especially in Kachin state where the majority of people follow the Baptist faith, which is seen as a challenge to the authority of the all-mighty CCP.

A businessman quoted by [Asia Times](#) says: "Cross-border ethnic minorities would go from China to Myanmar, maybe smuggling goods, or to learn about Christianity or Buddhism. Some would go through legal immigration channels and some wouldn't, but they were going to Myanmar to attend seminaries. So the border wall is effectively blocking off the routes used for underground

religious infiltration into China. When foreign religions are preaching to people in China across the border from Myanmar, that's overseas religious infiltration."

- Cutting off the small trade to create a monopoly via the Chinshwehaw-Lincang crossing point, where most of the trade has been rerouted since the coup by the junta, in an effort to gain central control over the border trade. Jason Tower at USIP sees a wider plan at play: "While the closing of the border trade hurts the junta over the short term; it offers the possibility of the centralization of the border trade in ways that we have not seen historically between the two countries. Assuming that the border re-opens for small traders in the future, the presence of the wall will mean the need to go through formal checkpoints, which will increasingly fall under the control of central authorities with some important exceptions in Wa and Mongla - and potentially Kachin, but uncertain as to how long this will be in the case. The junta, Wa and Mongla will stand to be the key beneficiaries of this, while local traders will be the major losers."
- Depriving Chinese dissidents or criminals of a way of escaping the country via its southern underbelly, Ruili being a favorite exit point for Chinese people wanting to flee China and head for Thailand. The Chinese government has also undertaken a vast hunt for Chinese citizens involved in illegal businesses, forcing them to return to China. The penalties for not returning are extremely strict – including cut off pensions and other benefits for family members such as accessing welfare, subsidies and public services in China, confiscating assets and canceling one's household registration – meaning the loss of benefits for life.

An investigation by the SCMP explains, "Local public security bureaus across China in May initially told suspects who were connected to internet fraud committed by or against Chinese nationals in Myanmar's border regions – specifically the Muse, Kokang, Wa State and Mong La areas, where gangs that run illegal casinos and scams are known to be based – to return home, but the scope of the recall was soon expanded with new directives and notices emerging on social media by June calling "all nationals in northern Myanmar" to return. According to a widely circulated but unverified leaked spreadsheet compiled by Chinese public security authorities, more than 141,000 Chinese nationals have been listed as individuals who should be "persuaded to return.""

They mainly come from impoverished or less-developed cities in Fujian, Hunan, Guizhou and Guangxi provinces. "I can guarantee with my life and reputation that over 90% of people on the list are just ordinary civilians who do business honestly," said a Chinese businessman who actively helps compatriots return home. "They lead a tough life abroad and have invested all their savings here."

Jason Tower at USIP says: "The wall is just as much about keeping Covid-19 out as it is related to keeping Chinese nationals in. The campaign that China has launched to force its nationals to return from Northern Myanmar specifically and from Southeast Asia more broadly is unlike anything I have seen related to China's efforts to control its nationals overseas in the past. The wall effectively makes unauthorized border crossings by China nationals almost impossible – and we already see that this has had an impact on Chinese transnational criminal activity across the region (although not necessarily in a good way). It has also dramatically disrupted normal commercial activities and exchanges between China and Southeast Asia, as Chinese nationals are now guilty until proven innocent when they visit Southeast Asia. While so, there is some evidence that Yunnan has much greater concerns about the Myanmar border than the Lao or Vietnam borders. Border trade between Yunnan and Laos has actually increased during the same period since the coup when it has dramatically decreased between Myanmar and Yunnan."

Since the Covid-19 pandemic started, China has also moved on to build a permanent wall along its other borders, such as the Laos and the Vietnam ones.

On October 23, 2021, China passed a new Land Borders law aimed at enhancing border protection by authorizing the use of weapons to halt "illegal" border crossings and listing reasons for Chinese authorities to ban those crossings. "Article 4 of the new law mentions China's sovereignty and territorial integrity as sacred and inviolable. China has a new tool to wield during any future flare-ups along its borders with foreign entities, whether those be the Indian government, Afghan refugees or Myanmar rebel groups. Scholars say the law appears to be aimed at legitimizing military and armed police actions along 22,117 kilometers of largely remote, rugged land borders with 14 other countries while warning other states against testing China's resolve in any sovereignty spats. Other new Chinese legislation includes a law passed early this year that formalizes Beijing's use of the coast guard to defend its disputed claims in the South China Sea."

For the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Andrew Ong suggests both a dual strategy of securitization and containment: "To the Chinese, securitization is a public health good, a show of technological reach by the Chinese state, a symbolic safeguarding of sovereignty. It also entails a heavy infrastructural investment. Covid-19 has given an ideal rationale for securitizing states across the globe. Even after the pandemic is controlled, states can deploy the physical barriers and surveillance infrastructure on illegal migration, narcotics trafficking, smuggling, and other potentially illicit flows that bridge the China-Myanmar borderlands. The Great Wall of China, as historians have suggested, did not only keep out the "barbarians", but also kept people and labor in."

Engaging the junta and EAOs in 'vaccine diplomacy'

This dual strategy also applies to the management of the Covid-19 pandemic out of its territory. China has committed to providing Covid-19 vaccines to more than 80 countries under its "Health Silk Road," a pharmaceutical extension of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a multi-billions ambitious program to boost infrastructure and trade across all continents.

Under its "vaccine diplomacy," China has supplied in a first batch three million doses of Sinovac or Sinopharm to Myanmar, one million that was sold to the junta and two million of free donations, specifically to various Ethnic Armed Organisations (EAOs). Four months before the Sinovac vaccine was approved by the World Health Organization (WHO) as safe for emergency use, China gave it to some of the ethnic armies who control areas of Shan and Kachin States along the frontier with China, according to the Irrawaddy: "The United Wa State Army, Myanmar's largest ethnic armed group, started its vaccination program in late February 2021, according to an announcement on WeChat. It has vaccinated almost all of its 550,000 population in its self-administered territory that covers six townships across two districts in Shan State."

The Nikkei Asian Review adds: "The Kachin Independence Army (KIA), Shan State Army-North and United Wa State Army -- the largest of Myanmar's rebel forces -- have become conduits for doses of Chinese-made Covid-19 vaccines, bolstering alliances that Beijing has cultivated in a corner of Southeast Asia that is strategically important to Yunnan Province in China's southwest." Col. Naw Bu, head of news and information for the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO), the political wing of the KIA in August 2021, said: "We have vaccinated 20,000 people ... more than 10,000 have already received both doses. We plan to vaccinate around 40,000 people, including the internally displaced, in our KIO-controlled area."

The Myanmar military regime is shunned by most of the countries, at least openly. The procurement of India Covishield jabs and the participation in the Covax program run by the WHO have been halted by the coup, leaving it reliant on China's goodwill alone. Parallel to the sale of doses to the military, Beijing offered vaccines to the ethnic armed groups in Myanmar's borderlands because it has long-term close political, military and business links with them, and because it wants to avoid at all costs the risk posed by unvaccinated people moving across the Myanmar-China frontier.

During the third wave of Covid-19 from June 2021, our journalist found out that most locals in Namkham and Muse townships actually did not take Chinese-provided vaccines because of a lack of trust. A Civil Society Organization' representative operating in northern Shan State said: "The locals also believe

there is some hidden agenda behind Chinese' vaccine and are very wary of taking Sinovac or Sinopharm. Why did the locals refuse to get vaccinated? The reason is simple. Because they oppose China even more than they oppose the military council. In the past, locals sometimes protested against China; but nowadays, they are even more reluctant to accept Chinese business in Myanmar. For decades, China has exploited the border population economically, taking advantage of their lack of knowledge and subjugating the locals for their livelihood."

"As of November 12, 2021, China had provided a total of 38.79 million doses of Sinovac and Sinopharm vaccines, according to the embassy in Yangon, of which 8.9 million doses were donated." quotes [Frontier Myanmar](#), which reports a similar defiance towards Chinese-made vaccines across the country.

Finally, the impact of the Muse-Ruili border closure, Myanmar's largest overland trading zone and a key source of medical supplies, from July 2021 fuelled the resentment towards China. According to [Myanmar Now](#), up to five 12-wheeler trucks carrying masks and six trucks carrying hand sanitizers and PPE were arriving in Myanmar every day, but traders found themselves unable to import desperately needed medical supplies through Myanmar's most important overland trade route after China closed the border. "While Chinese authorities said exceptions would be made for drugs and medical supplies, the reality on the ground is that nothing is coming into the country."

Detection in September of two Covid-19 cases in Ruili, reportedly illegal migrants from Myanmar, led to the lockdown and mass testing, in late November 2020, of more than 200,000 inhabitants in the Chinese border town. On July 8, 2021, China closed the only trade route left open. The Ruili-Muse customs gate handled the majority of border trade with China pre-Covid-19 and border trade between the two countries at the Muse crossing alone was worth more than US\$3.4 million per day.

Small businessmen shouldering the collapse of border trade

According to figures from the junta's commerce ministry quoted by [Myanmar Now](#), "Exports at Myanmar's most important overland trade route have plummeted by \$534m over the past year because of China's shutdown of border gates at the Muse 105 Mile Trade Zone. Four of the five gates at Muse have been closed since April last year while the fifth was shuttered in July as Covid-19 cases surged across Myanmar. [In November 2021, one of the crossing points at Lincang-Chinshwehaw reopened.] Myanmar's total export revenues at Muse fell to a little over \$2.4bn for the past financial year, down from \$2.95bn the year before." Additionally, border trade volume between Myanmar and China from October 1 to November 5, 2021, was valued at US\$103.6 million, of which \$94.9 million was exports and \$8.7 million was imports. It is a significant collapse from the figures during the same period as the previous year, with trade volume amounting to \$694.6 million, of which \$548.1 million was exports, and \$146.5 million was imports.

Most locals living in border areas of Namkham and Muse Townships rely heavily on the export of products such as sugarcane, corn, watermelon, beans, sesame, rice, rubber, seafood and charcoal to China. They are also dependent on the import of fertilizer, construction materials, electronic appliances and household commodities, including food products and garments. Hundreds of trucks were left stranded on both sides of the border when the trade gate was suddenly suspended.

In the first wave of Covid-19, the gates were temporarily open on and off, so the locals could still afford to load the goods. At the beginning of the second wave, most of the locals who were engaged in cross-border business could no longer export their goods. Since then, it has been difficult for them to make ends meet and have enough money to buy food and clothes. Most exports have been discontinued due to disparities in costs and sales, and many locals are in dire straits as they cannot recover their expenses and find an alternative source of income. Most lost their jobs when cross-border trade was effectively banned because they relied on China alone.

"Sugarcane and corn are a big export market in those areas, as Chinese traders are paying more than Burmese traders. Growers bought the seeds and fertilizers they needed and were in contact with Chinese traders before planting so as to guarantee the sale. That way we didn't have to worry," says a trader from Hat Hin village to our journalist.

Corn farmers in Namkham township lost thousands of acres of crops from May 2020 when the Chinese government began closing the gates. Before, 70 vehicles were passing each day, and each one could carry one and a half tons.

At the time, a ton was worth 5,500 Yuan (11 lakh kyats). Corn and watermelon were seen dumped into the Shwe Li River or on the side of the road, where passers-by were asked to take the no-longer exported products for free.

The maize grown in the area is from Taiwan, and it cannot be dried, Namkham farmers said. If they put it in a bag after harvest, it will turn yellow the next day. Therefore, it needs to be exported on the same day.

Daily Eleven also reports that hundreds of truckloads of tissue-culture bananas were dumped due to the delayed reopening of the Lweje border gate in Kachin state. "Some truck owners are owed millions of kyat by Chinese banana companies but the truck owners cannot sue them because they are not Myanmar citizens. The export of tissue-culture bananas is not an official business between two governments. The closure of the border causes losses for all of us in the banana business, including truck owners," says a businessman.

Chinese nationals who grow tissue-culture banana growers in Myanmar have also been protesting against their own government since the end of 2021, as they have faced heavy losses for two consecutive years. They fear being unable to clear loans from the Chinese government and facing the prospect of having to go out of business if they cannot get a return on their investment this season. "Processing the sugarcane is easy because it is sent directly to factories in China. But there are many processes for bananas because they are sent to different countries. After the truck crosses the border, they have to wait at the truck station for two days to be checked for Covid-19, so the bananas ripen and traders face big losses," a truck owner said to Daily Eleven.

China's economy has also been hit due to repeated pandemic-related disruption. For example, it is the world's biggest producer of refined tin and has relied on Myanmar for 94 percent of its tin concentrate imports in 2019, but the number dropped below 82 percent between January-September 2021.

Despite the restrictions, Chinese trucks are still allowed to pass some goods across the border, and locals claim that the Chinese government is biased in its policy, as Chinese citizens who work in cornfields or banana plantations can still enter Myanmar, but Burmese nationals who try to enter China have been arrested.

Putting a stop to the migrant workers' exodus

Due to the scarcity of jobs and low wages in Myanmar, many citizens, including young people in northern Shan State, go to China to work.

Thousands of domestic workers used to enter legally through the official gates or illegally. Prior to Covid-19, residents said that nearly 300 people passed through the Mant Wain and Sin Phyu gates of the Muse-Ruili checkpoint every day.

On November 8, 2020, the city of Ruili was put on full lockdown after one Covid-19 case was detected, stranding thousands of Myanmar migrant workers who found themselves unable to return home, despite being registered to cross the border.

“The house owner said we cannot leave the house for seven days. Migrant workers are facing difficulty. We cannot work and we cannot return home. Daily wage laborers are in big trouble and at risk of starving because the lockdown is imposed often,” said a 30-year-old Myanmar migrant worker in Ruili to Daily Eleven. Some workers had to sleep in parks for days. “Some workers have registered to return home, but the border is not open. They cannot stay here because business is not good. They have to pay rent and are facing financial difficulties.”



Photo: The Myanmar Photo Project Collective



After the military coup, China forcibly sent back Burmese nationals who were working in the neighboring country. From July 26 to October 22, 2021, the repatriation of Burmese nationals by China has been significant with 13,210 people coming back to Myanmar. This is a result of the massive loss of jobs in Yunnan due to the border lockdown and the assumption that the migrant workers would go back and forth regularly and risk spreading Covid-19.

A migrant worker in China said to our journalist that all Burmese nationals working on the Chinese side must return before the 2022 Chinese New Year. "Only those who have a residence visa are allowed to stay [NB: Holders of Pauk Phaw cards ("fraternal relationship"), which China started issuing in 2019, were also believed to be allowed to stay], and all holders of red and green passports/books must return. Burmese women who married Chinese nationals but do not have a visa or marriage contract as proof must return to Myanmar. The Chinese government has not officially released any information that the Chinese side will resend all Burmese workers before the New Year, but this is what we heard."

Tens of thousands of Burmese migrant workers are facing unemployment problems and are not able to support their families anymore, who in turn have lost their abilities to make ends meet because of the near-end of agricultural exports.

Local feelings have turned sour since the closure of the border, as well as China's perceived support for the February 1st coup d'Etat perpetrated by general Min Aung Hlaing and its leaders' refusal to condemn human rights violations by the self-appointed SAC junta regime. Myanmar's military coup resulted in widespread protests across the country, some of which have involved attacks on Chinese-held factories in Yangon and elsewhere.



In Muse, Shan State, protesters incriminate China's perceived influence on Myanmar politics. The sign in Mandarin reads: "Free our leader." Photo: The Myanmar Photo Project Collective



Protecting China's interests in Myanmar at all costs

According to our journalist, the popular sentiment is that Myanmar is being bullied by its powerful neighbor. People see with apprehension China's determination to pursue its infrastructure projects and investments abroad even as the rule of law has been effectively suspended in Myanmar. Xi Jinping made his last trip to a foreign country in January 2020, when he made a two-day visit to Myanmar to promote the BRI. He sees his signature mega-plan as necessary to support a rise in domestic growth and thus public support for the CCP and his own persona.

An article in [East Asia Forum](#) states, "China's interests in Myanmar have gradually increased in recent years. This has materialized through three different but related means — individuals privately investing mostly in Mandalay and northern Myanmar, corporations investing in industrial estates and farming land, and state-level investment in long-term developmental projects."

Among the most important projects which are part of China's BRI in Myanmar are the Muse–Mandalay highway, the Myitkyina Industrial Zone, the Yangon Redevelopment plans, and the Sino-Myanmar double oil and natural gas pipelines, which links Myanmar's deep-water port of Kyaukphyu in the Bay of Bengal, Rakhine state, to Kunming in Yunnan Chinese province via Northern Shan State.

Photo: The Myanmar Photo Project Collective



Our journalist in Shan state witnessed Chinese soldiers in July 2021 from the Myanmar side: "We can see them when we stand on a hill in Namkhan township, but they don't cross for now. They stay on the Chinese side, but we cannot take pictures because of CCTV everywhere." Experts advance that those deployments in Jiegao, an important border town, were more related to concerns about the renewed intense fighting between the Burmese army and the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), an ethnic armed organization operating in the Kokang region. But the lack of reliable and transparent information and the general climate of insecurity and threat make some residents fear that those troops could enter Myanmar if it is deemed necessary to guard the pipelines or other large infrastructure projects.



Locals living along the Myanmar-China border belong to the Shan, Ta'ang, Kachin, Kokang and other ethnic groups and have been facing Chinese aggression for decades. Some try to put up with it, while some try to resolve intimidation from the Chinese side on their own. But the price of resisting China with bare hands is high.

"When we protest encroachment issues, China cuts off the electricity lines we depend on, as the national grid of Myanmar has not reached our areas. There are many villages where the Chinese have done this," says Nan San Kham from Hat Hin village in Namkham Township to our journalist.

He said that the residents of 19 border villages in Muse and Namkham

townships had often destroyed fences built by the Chinese on Myanmar territory because regime forces with responsibility for border security did not bother to take upon the issue. The border issue has been inadvertently expanded by China for years, but there has been little intervention by the Burmese government.

The Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA), Shan State Progressive Party (SSPP), the Restoration Council of Shan State (RCSS), the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), the USWA (United State Wa Army) and the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) are also operating in those areas. Some of those ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) managed to set up parallel administrations to the central government and control large parts of Northern Shan State and Kachin states.

However, the issue of Chinese encroachment and fencing has not been taken upon by the EAOs, according to a CSO representative in Northern Shan State interviewed by our journalist. "It is difficult to point out, and I am afraid to say so, but EAOs are pretending to not see the issue. Some militants are under the USWA influence, and we know that the Wa are relying on China alone. They can be considered as under Chinese influence as long as it stays that way, it will go on like this. The current problems of the locals in the border areas are related to the ethnic armed groups, and if they are not addressed, the trust of the locals in the EAO will be diminished."

"Don't give tax to the rebels. It's not the lottery" referring to cases of 'protection money' people have to pay to ethnic-armed organisations in rebel groups-held areas. Photo: The Myanmar Photo Project Collective



Jason Tower at USIP confirms, “There is little that EAOs can do to address this. They are willing to accept China encroach slightly if it means that they will receive permission and even support from the Chinese to build their armies and capacities.”

For years, the Chinese government maintained close ties with the ethnic armed groups that hold much of the Myanmar-China border. This includes the militias that control the Kokang, Mong La and Wa self-administrated areas. The latter, the USWA is one of the most heavily armed groups in Myanmar with a reputation for drug production and trafficking.

Furthermore, unresolved conflict between EAOs over trade monopoly and ethnic identity is forcing local people to flee their homes for decades. The fence is therefore having an impact on the situation of Internally Displaced People (IDP) people who used to shelter on Chinese soil waiting for battles to end in their villages.

Local villagers being caught between the wall and the war

In Mong Ko, Muse Township, fierce fighting between the military council and the MNDAA intensified on October 12, 2021, leaving six civilians, including two two-year-old children, with shrapnel injuries, and forcing more than 400 people from Phaw Jone Par and Ywar Thit villages to flee to fields and build huts near the border fence with China. They were evicted by Chinese authorities the next day on the pretext of being too close to the border, according to DVB. "We are in trouble because Chinese authorities told us to go to another place. We are staying on Myanmar soil, but they have evicted us," an IDP said.

While the locals were fleeing as refugees, China erected another fence to prevent them from entering. As a consequence, no one displaced by the recent clashes has tried to cross into China, as this was the case during previous pre-Covid-19 conflicts. People who tried to help refugees said to our journalist that there are more guards and technology is also being used. "IDP camps near the border are closed by double fences. The rest of the area is covered. At one entrance, there were three or four guards. If anyone approaches the fence, a warning sound will be triggered, and guards will come out."

A Shan IDP in Hpai Kawng quoted by [Frontier Myanmar](#) explains, "not even a rat could enter China now."

"The border fence has also complicated the aid response, as shown by the situation of IDPs from two Kachin villages who are sheltering in the jungle just 500 meters from the fence in Hpawng Hseng.

Ah Doi, a volunteer who asked to be identified by a pseudonym, said a group of Kachin women who married men in China and are living across the border raised funds through the Chinese social media application WeChat to buy dry food items. After trying unsuccessfully to throw the food over the border fence, the women sent money via WeChat instead. "The border is sealed with the fence, and now they have built it higher than before, so it is quite difficult to pass food by throwing. It is double-fenced and about 15 feet high."

Chinese authorities have ordered the IDPs not to approach the fence, and no relevant authority has come yet to resolve either the dramatic displacement in those areas or China's trespassing on Myanmar soil.

Before the coup, in November 2020, a Myanmar military battalion sent a letter to Chinese authorities taking issue with the building of the fence in Northern Shan State's Laukkai township, in the [Kokang Self-Administered Zone](#) (SAZ).

The construction of the fence in Laukkai was suspended following the letter from the military. Since the coup, only some members from the Shan Nationalities League for Democracy conducted field inspections and marked Myanmar territory along with residents on September 21, 2021, according to the Shan Herald.

A thousand kilometers of the permanent wall has already been completed and the project is supposed to be finished in October 2022. With the general instability and civil war gripping the country, residents are left on their own, locked into the Southern Great Wall and sold off by the junta-led government, which has chosen pragmatism as it is battling for its survival.

In a parallel development related by the DVB on February 8, 2022, Min Thein, vice-chairman of the Muse Rice Commodity Exchange, said that trade being conducted within Muse's 105-mile Trade Zone, which was previously taxed in US dollars, will now be taxed in Chinese yuan.

Photo: The Myanmar Photo Project Collective





The Burmese army has a long history of distrusting the CCP because of China's reported business of selling weapons to EAO, and its veiled expansionism seen as potentially threatening for Myanmar national sovereignty, one of the core concerns of the Tatmadaw. But they seem forced to enter an uneasy alliance against Western pressure as the Myanmar military is facing one of the biggest crises of legitimacy since its inception and cannot afford to be too choosy. More than one year after the coup, the junta can count his friends on one hand: Prayuth Chan-ocha in Thailand, Vladimir Putin in Russia, Alexander Lukashenko in Belarus, Hun Sen in Cambodia and Xi Jinping in China.



Many local residents said they had sent letters to the relevant authorities to counteract China's moves onto their territory, but nobody came to solve their issue. "As long as the local or national authorities do not want to intervene, the border people will continue to be trespassed by China and be on their own dealing with this powerful neighbor," concludes a Northern Shan State resident.

Photo: The Myanmar Photo Project Collective



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